

THE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS: DR. JEKYLL OR MR. HYDE?

In recent years, public opinion polls have become an important phenomenon in American public life. Condemned by some, praised by others, they are now a focus of interest and of controversy. The Editors of the *QUARTERLY* therefore believe it timely to present a comprehensive discussion of some of the major problems raised by the polls. What is good about them, what bad? What are their limitations, what their virtues? Needless to say, the *QUARTERLY* maintains an attitude of impartiality in this debate and does not necessarily endorse any of the views expressed in this symposium. The discussion is introduced by Hadley Cantril, social psychologist at Princeton University and Director of the Princeton Public Opinion Research Project.

AS THE twentieth century ushered in the automobile and the radio, it has also brought the development of the public opinion poll. But unlike automobiles and radios, public opinion polls are restricted in their use by the political climate of the country. Their development is possible only within a democratic framework. And, even within that framework, their continuance is encouraged only during a time of social change and controversy. The polls thrive on open or potential conflicts in opinion. It is no mere accident that public interest in the polls and technical improvements of polling machinery have occurred primarily during depression years which brought insistent, widespread problems and aggressive governmental action.

The history of public opinions polls—their early use by political parties, their refinement via the road of market research—has been frequently described. The general lines along which they operate, the differences between the incidental sampling procedure used by the late *Literary Digest* poll and the scientific sampling used by current poll administrators have often been pointed out. And people who know anything at all about modern polls, know that they, like Jim Farley, have predicted elections with uncanny accuracy. The polls do not claim infallibility, they count on about a three or four per cent error.

In the presidential election of 1936 the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO), Crossley, and *Fortune* surveys predicted that Mr. Roosevelt would receive the following percentages of the

total popular vote, which may be compared with his actual vote of 60.7 per cent:

	<i>Poll Forecast</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
AIPO	53.8%	6.9%
Crossley	53.8	6.9
Fortune	61.7	1.0

SUBSEQUENT ELECTION FORECASTS

Since 1936 the poll administrators have, they believe, refined their techniques, ironed out some snags. The American Institute of Public Opinion, for example, relied partially on mail ballots for its information in 1936. It now uses interviews altogether. During the past four years data have been accumulating which facilitate the construction of better cross-sections of the population. That some improvement has been made since 1936 is suggested by subsequent results of the AIPO. Table 1 gives the Institute's box score since then, taken from published results.

Table 1

	<i>Poll Forecast</i>		<i>Election Result</i>		<i>Deviation</i>
1937:					
Maine Sales Tax Referendum	Against	72%	Against	67%	5%
Detroit Mayoralty election	Reading	65	Reading	63	2
New York Mayoralty	LaGuardia	64	LaGuardia	60	4
1938:					
Maine Republican Gubernatorial Primary	Barrows	78	Nominated by	75	3
Kentucky Democratic Senatorial Primary	Barkley	59	Nominated by	57	2
South Carolina Democratic Senatorial Primary	Smith	57	Nominated by	55	2
Maryland Democratic Senatorial Primary	Tydings	59	Nominated by	60	1
Georgia Democratic Senatorial Primary	George	46	Nominated by	44	2
New York Gubernatorial election	Lehman	50.2	Elected by	50.7	0.5
Congressional elections	Republicans to gain 75 seats giv- ing them a total of 165 seats in House of Repre- sentatives		Republicans ob- tained 170 seats in the House		0.5

As many writers have pointed out, election returns are, after all, not perfect tests of poll predictions. Many variables enter in to keep some people away from the voting booth. The weather, transportation difficulties, party activity, intimidation of various kinds may distort the final vote but not affect poll results. Hence it could be argued that the polls may reflect the wishes of the electorate more faithfully than the elections themselves.

But still no other method remains to test the accuracy of the polls. And if we compare poll results with elections over the past four years, we must conclude that the polls have demonstrated their right to be taken seriously.

And they have been taken seriously. They have been heralded by some as the hope of democracy, they have been damned by others—on both the right and the left—as weapons inimical to the effective operation of American government. Certain editors and social scientists have lauded their techniques, certain Congressmen and columnists have roundly condemned them. Both praise and criticism have been frequent and widespread.

SYMPOSIUM

This issue of the *QUARTERLY* attempts to bring together under a single cover a serious discussion of the rôle public opinion polls do, or should, play in our social system, and of the reliability with which they represent true opinion. Since discussion of the merits of the polls has by no means been confined to academic cloisters, and since men in the world of affairs obviously have some stake in poll results and their possible effects, the symposium includes articles by both academicians and non-academicians. The reader will see that critics have not held their punches, that defenders have not hesitated to rise to the occasion, that social scientists and statisticians have tried to envisage the polls with some historical and methodological perspective.

The symposium begins with a vigorous statement by a sociologist who sees the majority of people incompetent to deal with the complex questions of modern government, who feels that the polls seriously jeopardize the work of experts who, because of the richness and range of their information, are better able to evaluate the soundness and consequences of various courses of

action. Government administrators then express their contention that if policy formation is to be realistic and efficient, it must be accomplished within a framework of accepted opinion which is, in part at least, reflected by the polls. A political scientist then compares the polls to other mechanisms that have emerged in this country for feeling the public's pulse. And a survey of Congressmen tells us to what extent the men on Capitol Hill pay attention to the voices of the American Institute of Public Opinion and the *Fortune* polls in arriving at their legislative decisions.

If the law-makers of the land are going to listen to the people, what will happen to our traditional form of representative government? It will disappear in favor of a pure democracy, the next writer maintains. He finds the prospects horrible to contemplate. But a man well known for his contributions to the field of opinion measurement sees the polls reestablishing after many years the kind of democracy we lost when the country became too sprawling for decisions to be reached in town-meeting fashion. And the judgment of the people he holds to be sound. A prominent newspaper publisher confirms this impression, pointing out that the polls help to debunk pressure groups and, by furnishing a mechanism whereby opinions on specific issues can be separated from attitudes toward certain candidates, aid in reducing the cloudiness of election years. But it is precisely during political campaigns that the polls do most damage, a Congressman contends. They enlarge the "bandwagon" vote so unfairly that they should be prohibited. Yet the poll administrators, whose article follows the Congressman's, find little evidence of bandwagon effect resulting from poll predictions.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

The remaining discussions are primarily concerned with the technical problems inherent in the polling technique. How faithful a picture does the poll camera take? And what kinds of pictures can it take? A social psychologist wonders if the polls can measure the intensity of opinion as well as its direction, if the polls ask questions in the ways most appropriate to get reliable answers. The next writer points to a variety of possible distortions

of opinion that may occur in the actual interview situation, where strangers confront each other and one tries to put the thoughts of the other in the proper categories on his interview schedule. The fundamental problem of sampling and the ways to determine the reliability of a sample are then discussed in as non-technical a fashion as any crack statistician can achieve. An article by a poll administrator tells how he apportions people according to the most important determinant of a representative cross-section, economic status, and how individuals are classified by this criterion in a culture where it is impertinent for an inquiring interviewer to ask a straight question concerning the annual income of the respondent. The usefulness and limitations of the polls in discovering opinion determinants are then considered. And the final article evaluates the questions asked by the polls and the answers obtained, from the point of view of social science.

OTHER PROBLEMS

Many other specific problems might also be raised. But at this early stage of our knowledge, few of them could be satisfactorily answered. There is, for example, the important consideration of the way questions are worded. No one knows better than the poll administrator how vital a problem this is. Gallup faced this issue when he devised the split ballot with different wordings on alternate forms of the ballot. Roper believes the matter of sufficient importance to warrant systematic experimentation, the results of the first experiment appearing elsewhere in this issue. No article has been included in the symposium on this important problem, simply because information to date is too inadequate to warrant any realistic interpretation.

One might also ask to what extent the polls determine the pattern of people's thought by what may sometimes be regarded as the limited nature of the questions. How much are personal shadings of opinion obscured when people must answer with a simple "yes" or "no," or by means of a restricted attitude scale? One might also wonder what kind of opinion it is that we get from a poll. Is there any way in which we can determine more accurately what lies behind that opinion, from what more basic frames of reference, from what system of values it derives? Perhaps more

comment analysis is needed, more interrelated questions on single issues, more information regarding the background of the respondent. If we could better understand the relationship of opinions to the personal lives of people, we might avoid the oversimplification of some arguments regarding the pro-and-con of the polls. We might better understand when and why wording is important, when and why there is a bandwagon effect, when and why we may expect opinion to be stable, when and why we should look for variations in different population groups.

The social scientist could pose problems that it would take him years to answer. The practical man of affairs or of politics can find equally practical men to contest the arguments he puts up. Modern poll administrators are themselves highly conscious of the fact that this new measuring device is only in its infancy, that everybody has much to learn. But while they and others are learning, the polls go on.

It is outside the scope of this symposium to discuss questions of ownership, regulation, and control. The attempt here is rather to give information that would facilitate reasoned judgment on such problems. Government operation of polls has its obvious disadvantages; the machinery for the public administration of the polls is lacking in this country; the tremendous cost of the regular surveys makes it unlikely that any non-profit organization would sponsor them. One inherent argument for the maintenance of the present state of affairs is that the very survival of polling organizations depends on their honesty and accuracy. So far no charlatans have survived. To discourage their emergence or survival, perhaps a public audit of the polls would be feasible. These are wide-open questions. But as the polls amass their data and continue to tell people what they think, these questions may become more insistent. Obviously they should not be answered by prejudice.

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